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ABSTRACT

All National Home Study Council (NHSC) schools need public relations (PR) programs that are focused on the success of the school's graduates and the educational rigor and quality of its instruction rather than on the school owner's personal success or the success/size of the school. PR can be handled by schools' marketing departments. PR programs can be more effective than advertising because people usually put more credence in "editorial" matter than in advertisements. Among the steps that PR directors can take to promote their schools are the following: time announcements to coincide with community events; become familiar with news media deadlines; develop mailing lists; create press kits on new/existing courses; and coordinate PR activities with development of the school newsletter. News releases are probably the best known PR tools. Writers of news releases should do the following: ensure that stories are newsworthy; keep releases short; include a contact person and release date; use the inverted pyramid formula when writing; and maintain a "news" style. When designing their PR campaign, schools should make the best use of their NHSC accreditation. (Sample news releases for a new course, program graduate, and new facilities are included.) (MN)

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPER

Getting the Most PR for Your School

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPER
NUMBER 8

by

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPERS are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between home study professionals. For a complete set of *Occasional Papers*, write or call the NHSC.

Practical PR Begins with You

Home study is a unique player on the education and training stage. It combines elements of human interest (the 95-year-old high school graduate); drama (the P.O.W.'s who studied in North Vietnam); action (the graduates who designed the America's Cup yachts for both the winner and the loser); and fun (courses such as gourmet cooking and wine appreciation). You should take a close look at what your school does and how it does it. You have exciting stories to tell that will fascinate, educate and entertain the public.

NHSC members should capitalize on the special features of home study. Some of these are:

- Home study education is *unique*, not just different. It should not be compared directly to resident education, particularly collegiate study.
- Home study is *diverse*. A common bond that schools have is the method they use in teaching at a distance. The method makes interesting reading.
- The most important feature of a home study school is the *accomplishments of its graduates*. When schools turn out satisfied graduates, various PR efforts should highlight these graduates' achievements.
- Schools should focus on the success of graduates, the educational rigor and quality of instruction rather than on the school owner's personal success or the success or size of the school.

The National Home Study Council was founded nearly 70 years ago to promote sound educational practices of home study schools, and to enhance the image of home study for the common good of the public. The NHSC depends on each school to be responsible for its own actions and to be deserving of the public's goodwill.

Every NHSC school should have some type of Public Relations program in place and working. Your efforts should convey the same message: one of education, quality and graduate achievement. To-

gether, these messages will enhance the collective image of home study.

Home study is a part of American folklore. More than 90 million Americans have enrolled in courses in the past 100 years. NHSC members should be proud of this history and use it and their graduates' successes to reach new levels of public acceptance.

The Role of a PR Director

Many schools can't afford the luxury of having a full-scale public relations department. Usually, public relations is handled by the marketing department. Handled correctly, PR can augment the effectiveness of your advertising efforts. Public relations can be more effective than advertising, since people usually put more credence in "editorial" matter than in advertisements.

Public relations programs can be structured to fit your available time. You can do as much or as little as you want. Once programs are in place, it takes very little time to keep them up-to-date. Public relations programs can reach many people for a relatively small cost.

Once you have analyzed your school, identified your audiences, established your goals and objectives, and planned your projects, you need to appoint one person to be in charge of the program. No matter how simple or sophisticated your public relations program is, you need to sit down and map out a plan for at least a year that lists specific projects and deadlines.

To coordinate your PR program, consider these approaches:

- Prepare a calendar of newsworthy happenings, spacing them evenly throughout the year. Block out areas of your calendar that are traditionally slow for press media (holidays or the late summer, for example).
- Time your announcements to coincide with community events, especially if there is some relationship between your story and the local event.
- Do not sit on current news. Feed it instantly to the media.

- Acquaint yourself with news media deadlines and make every effort to be as timely as possible. Communicate with local editors once you have sent them material. Write to them, talk to them, invite them out to lunch. Don't forget, you are in the communications business.
- Develop mailing lists. You should have several: one for students, one for graduates, one for media, one for vendors, and one for state and federal legislators and other interested parties.

Here are some of the other duties a PR Director might handle:

- Create press kits on new courses and/or existing courses. Send these press kits to targeted magazines in the hope that they will generate "free" editorial space related to your course.

A press kit should include:

- pocket folder
 - news release
 - advertisement
 - catalog
 - 8 x 10 black and white print of the course
 - copies of editorial space generated in other magazines
 - cover letter
- Respond to requests for information from magazines, conduct phone interviews and provide additional information as necessary.
 - Work with the media director and other marketing staff to identify appropriate magazines to receive your PR materials.
 - Coordinate PR activities with the development of the school newsletter.
 - Serve on committees assigned to handle PR functions (i.e. NHSC's Public Relations Committee).
 - Coordinate the search and submission of an entry in the NHSC Outstanding Graduate Program.

Public relations is an endless progression toward greater public acceptance of your school, its courses and its graduates. Your PR program should be flexible, allowing broad latitude for new ideas, or at least, new ways to express old ideas.

How to Write a News Release

News or press releases are probably the most well known of the PR tools. News releases can be used to tell your stories to the media--newspapers, magazines, radio, and television--as well as to other organizations.

There are certain basic steps that can enhance the reception of your news release at an editor's desk:

- Be certain you have a newsworthy story to tell.
- Keep the release as short as possible. All releases should be type-written, clean and correct.
- Include who the release is from, who the contact person is (with home and work phone numbers), and a released date.
- Double or triple space all copy with wide margins. Use 8 1/2 x 11 plain white paper or your business letterhead. Start your copy a third of the way down the first page and end each page at the end of a paragraph with "MORE" centered to indicate additional pages.
- Do not hyphenate words. Use one side of the paper only and staple the pages together.
- Use the inverted pyramid formula when writing. Put the essential facts at the beginning of the release, with each succeeding paragraph detailing less and less important information.
- Keep it short and simple. Stick to the facts and avoid repetition, flowery prose and material unrelated to the story.
- Maintain a "news" style. The first paragraph should contain what

the news is, who said or released it, where and when it happened and sometimes why it happened.

- Proof read your copy and double check names, dates, and times.

Don't expect an editor to use a release unless it's really newsworthy, and don't send it at the last minute. You shouldn't ask for clippings or if the release is going to be used. Don't expect preferential treatment because you are an advertiser. The editorial department and advertising department maintain a "professional distance" from each other. You should send your release to the appropriate editor, not to the publisher or advertising managers.

You should never send a copy of something long, like a speech, without a summary. And only send one copy per publication. In other words, don't send copies to several different editors at one publication. And, last but not least, don't lie to the press; you might not get a second chance.

See pages 11-13 for samples of news releases.

Making the Best Use of Your NHSC Accreditation

As an accredited member of the National Home Study Council, your institution enjoys many benefits. These benefits are listed in the NHSC publication, *Benefits of National Home Study Council Accreditation and Membership*. From the view point of public relations, you should be proud of your accreditation and what it means.

Here are some ways to benefit from your accreditation:

- Use the "Accredited School" seal and/or fact of your accreditation in all of your advertisements, contracts, enrollment forms, and stationary. See the NHSC Business Standards for the proper wording.
- Include the fact that you are accredited on all course materials.

- Include a brief explanation on "What Does Accreditation Mean to You" in welcome letters to students or in the first lessons (see below).
- Use the NHSC to promote your school. Send the staff news releases on happenings at your school. NHSC may use the information in a newsletter, bulletin or journal. These are sent to hundreds of people who will then associate your school's name with NHSC.
- Use the fact that you are accredited as a feature to distinguish your school from other non-accredited competitors.
- Cite your institution's listing in the COPA/American Council on Education's directory, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*.
- Again, submit an entry to the NHSC Outstanding Graduate Program. This excellent national exposure costs your school nothing and it gives recognition to the special achievements and contributions of your graduates. The booklet, printed with all the graduates' names, bios, and quotes, is mailed out to the media throughout the year. Many times the Outstanding Graduates have been interviewed for articles by local or even national press.

Here is an example of the type of information you could include in your welcome letter to students:

Dear Student:

Thank you for enrolling with an NHSC accredited institution--

Accreditation is a process that gives public recognition to educational institutions found to meet published standards of quality. The XYZ Institute is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council, which is listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a "nationally recognized accrediting agency" for correspondence institutions. The Accrediting Commission is also recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA).

Accreditation is a voluntary, non-governmental means of assessing and certifying institutional quality. Accreditation means that an institution merits public confidence. Accredited institutions deliver on what they promise.

To protect the public, the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council has developed a thorough and careful evaluation system to assure that institutions meet standards of academic and administrative excellence. The XYZ Institute has been examined and has been found to --

- have clearly defined and well-stated learning objectives
- offer educationally sound and up-to-date courses of instruction
- provide satisfactory educational services to students
- have demonstrated ample student success and satisfaction
- have a competent and academically qualified faculty
- carefully screen students for admission
- promote its courses truthfully
- be financially and administratively able to deliver quality educational opportunities
- have an effective research and self-improvement program

Accreditation promises students that the institution they enroll in is a reputable one that will provide a quality education. Accreditation is the students' assurance of the highest quality in correspondence education.

Look for this seal before you enroll . . .



The NHSC engages in public relations virtually every day through its publications, interviews and communication with the media, conferences and workshops, personal meetings, visits to schools and agencies, handling telephone and letter inquiries, involvement with Congress, membership in national organizations, Accrediting Commission activities, and special programs. As an accredited NHSC member, take advantage of this knowledge and resource to promote your school.

Summary

Public relations is a way of life for any home study school that seeks not just to survive, but to flourish. PR in home study means that students come first, that people are important, and that excellence and quality are the watchwords for accredited schools.

Effective PR is not something you can go out and buy. Spending money on PR doesn't guarantee acceptance of your school. For PR to be truly effective, it must:

- come from a sincere and believable basis -- does the school stand behind its promises?
- be plausible and credible -- can (or should) home study really deliver the goods? Is the school offering a worthwhile service at a fair price?
- be pertinent to the correspondence method -- does the school really need to engage in this activity? Is the PR related to the school's mission?

Effective PR can only come from a school that believes in what it is doing and has earned the right, by virtue of years of ethical conduct in the marketplace, to its own success. Everyone in a school should be an ambassador for goodwill, from the all-important receptionist to the word processing staff member. Good public relations results from an overall positive attitude of your employees who are proud of their school's courses, services, and activities.

Sample News Release for a New Course

FROM: XYZ School
234 Street
Mytown, CC 34949

January 1, 1999

CONTACT: Jane Doe FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(304) 222-2222
(403) 222-2222 - home

For more than 75 years, XYZ School has pioneered the development of at-home training in new and exciting professional careers. XYZ School now introduces a new course in _____.

Entitled, _____, this home study course teaches students how to _____. Students who complete XYZ's course will be able to _____.

More than 2,000 students across the United States have graduated from XYZ School. XYZ School offers 23 different home study courses in subjects ranging from _____ to _____. It is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council, an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. For more information on XYZ School, call 800-234-5555.

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Sample News Release for a Graduate

FROM: XYZ School
234 Street
Mytown, CC 34949

January 1, 1999

CONTACT: Jane Doe FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(304) 222-2222
(403) 222-2222 - home

With today's fast changing technologies, it's more important than ever that adults become lifetime learners. One such person is Mr. James J. Jones, a 1988 graduate of _____ School. He recently completed a _____ (month or year) course in _____ from the XYZ School in Chicago, Illinois.

Mr. Jones is the son of Mr. and Mrs. _____ of _____ . With his new training, Mr. Jones plans are to _____ .

Since its founding in 1923, the XYZ School has helped to train more than 10,000 adults in the field of _____. The XYZ School is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council, a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

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Sample News Release for New Facilities

FROM: XYZ School
234 Street
Mytown, CC 34949

January 1, 1999

CONTACT: Jane Doe FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(304) 222-2222
(403) 222-2222 - home

XYZ School opened its new headquarters at _____. School President _____ said during the opening ceremonies, "This culminates an extensive three-year expansion program. The school was founded ____ years ago in ____, and we enrolled our first student in our _____ course. Today, we have more than _____ students enrolled in _____ courses as far away as _____ and _____."

The XYZ School is one of the more than 60 accredited member schools in the National Home Study Council. NHSC Executive Director, Michael P. Lambert, stated that "Home study is enjoying remarkable popularity as it expands to meet the growing and changing needs of education during this decade. This requires continuing education and continual upgrading of skills."

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About the Author

Sally R. Welch has been with the National Home Study Council for almost 19 years. She was the Director of Publications from 1976 until 1992. She was named Assistant Director in April 1992.

In 1979, Sally graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Maryland with a B.S. degree in Journalism with a speciality in Public Relations. She received a M.A. degree in Publications Design in 1989 from the University of Baltimore.

Sally has authored, co-authored and edited numerous NHSC publications, including the 258-page PR Handbook entitled *Public Relations for Home Study Schools*. She has also given presentations at NHSC Conferences and Workshops. Sally has worked with the NHSC Public Relations Committee for the past 17 years, and has been responsible for the NHSC Outstanding Graduate Program since its inception in 1984.

"My special thanks to the NHSC Public Relations Committee and its Chairman, Randy Drinko, for their guidance on this project."

Other Occasional Papers Available

Number One--Student Services: Achilles Heel or Crown Jewel? by Michael P. Lambert, Executive Director, NHSC

Number Two--What Manger Doesn't Study at Home? by Dr. Gordon Wills, Principal, The International Management Centres

Number Three--Toward Better Service and Testing by Dennis Foltz, Vice President of Education and Operations, Gemological Institute of America

Number Four--Testing Home Study Advertising by Jack Thompson, Consultant

Number 5--Conducting Graduate Surveys by Mary McKeown, Vice President, American School

Number 6--Enrollment Contracts for Home Study Schools by William Wright, President, American School

Number 7--Evaluating Your School's Worth by Michael P. Lambert, Executive Director, NHSC

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